

THE CHURCH PREPARES FOR EASTER

by Father Brian J. Ingram

Perhaps you've heard the story of the middle-aged man who would make his way every night to the neighborhood tavern, and order three glasses of beer. He'd sit at the bar with the three full glasses lined up in front of him in a neat little row and, very methodically, sip his way through each one. When he finished the third, he'd pay his tab and leave. It was always the same.

After a few nights of seeing this routine, the bartender couldn't resist asking why the man always ordered them all at once. The patron smiled and answered that the first glass was for him, while the second and the third were in honor of his brothers, each of whom lived out of state. Ordering the three drinks all together was his way of "staying close" to his absent siblings. The bartender could only shrug and chalk it up to harmless eccentricity.

When suddenly, one night, the man sat down at the bar and ordered only *two* drinks, the bartender was concerned. Had one of the man's brothers died? Had there been a falling-out in the family? The bartender just had to ask, and so he did. But the man hastened to reassure him, "Oh, nothing's the matter – my brothers are both doing just fine." "Then why only two glasses instead of the usual three?" the bartender persisted. "Well, if you must know," the patron replied, "I've decided to give up drinking for Lent!"

So often when we think of Lent, the first thing that occurs to us is having to "give something up." For forty long days, we deprive ourselves of dessert or chocolate or shopping sprees or a particular TV show, figuring that *sacrifice* is what this solemn season is all about. Sometimes these sacrifices are well thought-out and spiritually meaningful: at other times, as in the case of the bar patron in our story, our reasoning goes a little awry. In any case, it seems clear that many well-intentioned Catholics don't connect Lent with much more than meatless Fridays and doing

without ice cream. But, there's more – *much* more, in fact. Let's take a look at this solemn yet challenging season, trying if we can to grasp its real purpose.

Much like Advent, the four weeks that precede our celebration of Christmas, Lent is essentially a *time of preparation*. The season is not meant to stand on its own: it has meaning only in relation to the great feast to which it points, namely, *Easter*. For us as Christians, Easter is the holiest of days, recalling as it does the pivotal event in all of human history: the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. At the very heart of our religion is the admittedly outrageous claim that some 20 centuries ago, God broke the power of sin and death by raising His beloved Son from a cold, dark grave. Jesus of Nazareth, we contend is *not* dead, but is wonderfully alive! And, because He *is* alive, because death could not hold him captive, the human family is ransomed from the same fate. We who belong to Jesus are destined to follow the path that He has marked out for us, a path that leads us beyond physical death into endless life. Here, in a nutshell, is the "Good News" we're always talking about: nothing can separate us from the love of God, *not even death!* Take away Easter, take away the Resurrection-event, and Christianity is robbed of its meaning and its transforming power.

The wisdom of our Church's liturgical calendar is that it allows us a healthy stretch of time each year in which we ready our hearts and minds for commemorating this most joyous of days. Lent provides believers with an extended "retreat" of forty days (paralleling the forty days Jesus himself spent in the wilderness before inaugurating His public ministry) wherein we are challenged to leave sinfulness behind and embrace the Gospel with renewed passion and enthusiasm. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, we are repeatedly challenged throughout these weeks to look unflinchingly at our own sinfulness, to beg God's mercy for all that is not right with our lives, and to make a fresh, new beginning of goodness. Lent is meant to be a rigorous time, a spiritually strenuous time, a time for clearing away the debris in our lives so that the Light of Christ and the power of His Resurrection might make us new again.

If all this talk of being cleansed of sin and of being refreshed by the power of the Risen Jesus smacks of Baptism, that is no accident. In the earliest centuries of the Church's life, these weeks of prayer and penitence that we now call Lent were aimed primarily at those who *desired to be baptized*. At that time, one could not be admitted into the Church simply by showing up at the rectory and attending a class or two. Catechumens (*i.e.*, those preparing for initiation in the Church) were led through a rigorous period of conversion that could last for years. Once a person was deemed worthy to receive the sacraments, he or she would spend the weeks leading up to the Easter Vigil in intense prayer, fasting and instruction so as to be ready for the new life that would begin at the baptismal font. Today, of course, it is not only those preparing for Baptism and the Easter sacraments who participate in the Lenten season but the *whole* Church community. Nevertheless, these weeks continue to be a very special time for the men and women who will become full-fledged members of the Church at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday.

To aid us in this forty-day project of soul-searching and interior renewal, the church has traditionally proposed three important disciplines: *prayer, fasting and almsgiving*. Each of these is seen as a pillar on which a healthy spiritual life rests, and most of the devotional practices that we have come to associate with Lent – from the Stations of the Cross to giving up cookies – can readily be connected to one of these three disciplines.

Prayer brings us into daily communion with the Heart of the One who loves us and calls us His children.

Fasting reminds us that we “do not live on bread alone,” that there are things even more vital than what we eat and drink.

Almsgiving (*i.e.*, charity, giving to the needy) serves to reorient our hearts away from our own selfish preoccupations and toward the wellbeing of those around us, especially those who are hurting the most.

By attempting to give a bit more attention to prayer, by choosing to deny ourselves some food or a pleasure we normally enjoy, by striving for a greater measure of compassion and generosity toward our sisters and

brothers in need, we begin to chip away at our own pride and create a more ample space in which the Spirit of the Risen One can dwell.

Lent isn't meant to be a hardship or a burden. It isn't a test to see who can hold out the longest without a beer or a bowl of chocolate ice cream. Lent is a precious opportunity the Church gives us each springtime (and, incidentally, the word "Lent" comes from the same Middle English word that means "spring") to throw open the doors of our innermost selves to let the fresh air of God's love revitalize us. It is an invitation to journey for a while through the wilderness of human frailty and sin, so as to become all the more grateful for the mercy we have been shown. It is a challenge to put away our old habits of selfishness and hard-heartedness, so that the wonder and joy of Christ's Resurrection can influence the person we are becoming. Let us move through this sacred, grace-filled season in a spirit of openness to the work God intends to do in us, eager to gather in a few weeks' time at the empty tomb, and there to rejoice in the new life Jesus has won for us.

Blessed Lent, and happy Easter!

